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C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 001292

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM BO

SUBJECT: Mystery Surrounds Death of Independent Journalist

REF: MINSK 1193

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On October 18, Vasily Grodnikov, contributor to the independent daily Narodnaya Volya (NV), was found dead in his apartment with an injury caused by a blow to the head with a blunt object. It remains unclear whether or not he was murdered, even though the forensic results have been released. End Summary.

At the Scene of the Crime

¶2. (U) Early in the morning on October 18, independent newspaper NV contributor Vasily Grodnikov, age 67, was found dead in his apartment just outside of Minsk. Police examined the scene for five hours and found a broken stool, blood stains on the wall paper and clotted blood on Grodnikov's head. There were no signs of forced entry and the door was locked from the inside.

But Was It Murder?

¶3. (C) On October 18, NV Deputy Editor Svetlana Kalinkina informed Emboff that Grodnikov's relatives had received official confirmation from the police that Grodnikov was murdered. Kalinkina also reported the motive for the attack did not appear to be theft, as a large pile of money laying on the bookshelf remained untouched.

¶4. (C) Even after doctors released the official forensic report on October 19 stating Grodnikov died after being hit in the head with a blunt object, some still subscribe to the accidental death theory. Grodnikov's niece told the press her uncle likely fell, hit his head, and left blood stains on the wallpaper while trying to get to a phone. NV Editor-in-Chief Iosif Seredich stated, "I do not have any reason to believe that [Grodnikov] was killed." In light of recent GOB pressures on NV (reftel), Seredich was careful to stress Grodnikov worked on social, not political issues. Seredich also added Grodnikov suffered from health problems. [Note: Grodnikov's niece told the press her uncle suffered from hypertension. However, Grodnikov's health issues were more severe, possibly including hemorrhaging and difficulty in movement resulting from a brutal physical assault several years ago. Police never apprehended Grodnikov's attackers.]

Comment

¶5. (C) Although doctors determined the cause of death to be a blow to the head with a blunt object, what really happened to Grodnikov is still unknown. According to

Kalinkina, police confirmed privately to the family that Grodnikov was killed. Rumors abound that Grodnikov's death could be connected to the GOB crackdown on NV. The death also coincides with the one-year anniversary of the murder of another prominent independent journalist, Veronika Cherkasova, whose murder Belarusian authorities have yet to solve. She was murdered also amidst rumors of GOB involvement. But, so far, NV is not making any accusations. Police has yet to complete its investigation of the mysterious murder of independent journalist Veranika Charkasava, who was killed exactly one year ago.

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